



# Consistent Skill Modules for South Snohomish County

“Soft” Skills: Identifying  
Between-Industry Commonalities



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## “Soft” Skills: Identifying Between-Industry Commonalities



***Workforce Resources Center***

CASCADIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

**In partnership with:**

*South Snohomish County Local Area Planning*

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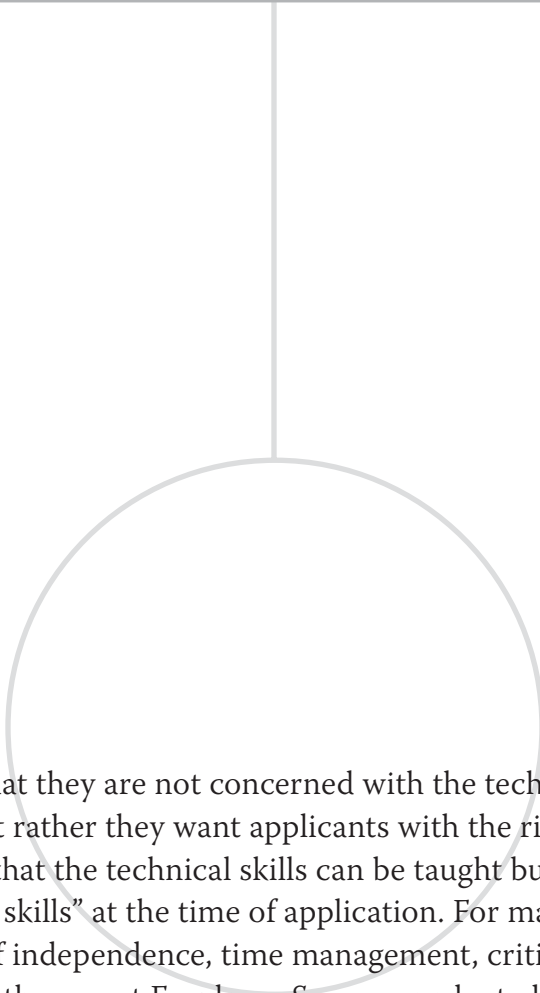


# 2004 Smart Move Business Outreach Innovations Project









Time and again employers say that they are not concerned with the technical skills of entry-level workers but rather they want applicants with the right attitude and work ethic. They state that the technical skills can be taught but they expect employees to have “soft skills” at the time of application. For many employers those include the skills of independence, time management, critical thinking and interpersonal skills. In the recent Employer Survey conducted by the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board (Washington State Employers Workforce Training Needs and Practices 2004), eighty-five percent of employers report difficulty in finding applicants with “soft skills.” Those skills include problem-solving (87% of those reporting difficulty,) communication (83%), positive work habits & attitude (83%), adaptability (79%), teamwork (75%) and the ability to accept supervision (69%.) In this same survey, 63% of employers had difficulty finding applicants with writing skills, 62% for math skills and 38% for reading skills.

Those who work with WorkFirst populations very quickly realize that these “soft skill” issues can be barriers to employment. The South Snohomish County Local Planning area partners had often discussed this issue and ways of making sure those WorkFirst participants had those skills when they began their job search. The group was able to tackle some of the topics with funds from the Targeted Wage Initiative program in the 2003-04 fiscal year. Classes in time management, basic computer applications and a math refresher course were offered to clients

in job search with Employment Security. This program had been successful but only met a few of those skill areas that employers have identified.

In the winter of 2004 funds became available from Community Trade and Economic Development and Employment Security to fund business outreach innovations. The South Snohomish County partners saw this as an opportunity to do more in the area of “soft skills.” The idea was to research the already established skill standards in hospitality, construction, medical and manufacturing fields to cull out the “soft skills” and then create curriculum that would address those areas. These areas were chosen by the Snohomish County Workforce Development Council as key industry clusters for the county. (Snohomish County 2010: A Blueprint for Education, Workforce and Economic Development in Snohomish County, [www.snocowdc.org/reports/BluePrint2010.pdf](http://www.snocowdc.org/reports/BluePrint2010.pdf)) From there the goal is that all WorkFirst participants who work with the partners would go through the same curriculum and be at the same “soft skill” proficiency. More specifically the project goals include:

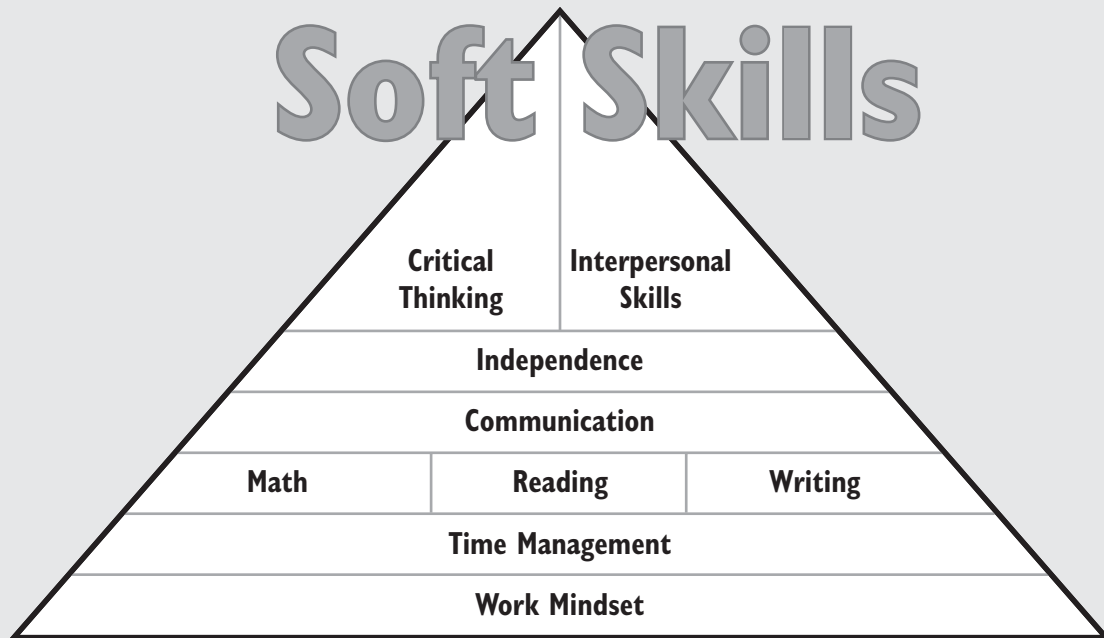
- Create a matrix of soft skills identified by the hospitality, construction, medical and manufacturing sectors. This would be organized by soft skill theme and would incorporate business partner comments.
- Create curriculum and lesson plans for use by partner agencies organized by soft skill theme.
- Increase the numbers of business contacts

This report is the result of the research into the skills standards for the four industry clusters. Also included is the evaluation of the focus groups that were held to confirm the research findings. This report will serve as the basis for the “soft skill” curriculum that will be used by all partners.

In our discussion with employer partners it became clear that there is a hierarchy to “soft skill” knowledge. Much in the way that one cannot teach division before subtraction, I would propose that you cannot teach higher level “soft skills” before teaching those more basic topics. I see “soft skill” development and mastery as building blocks. As shown on next page, each skill will build upon the prior.

In addition, because all partners will be teaching the same material those concepts can be enforced as clients move from one partner to another. For example, a client may take the Work Mindset and Time Management modules with Employment Security and then is referred to a community college for

# Soft Skills



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**CRITICAL THINKING:** Decision-making; Equipment selection; Estimate materials and time needed to complete job; Organize, prioritize and initiate activities; Problem solving; Review and interpret rules and regulations

**INTERPERSONAL SKILLS:** Coordination (of work with others); Establish and maintain effective relationships; Exercise tact and diplomacy; Get along with others; Meet and deal tactfully with customers; Service orientation; Social perceptiveness; Work effectively with members of the public and co-workers

**INDEPENDENCE:** Equipment selection; Organize, prioritize and initiate activities

**COMMUNICATION:** Active Listening; Follow written and oral instructions; Instruct others; Speak clearly and informatively; Understand and follow instruction

**MATH, READING & WRITING:** Basic Arithmetic, Reading and Writing skills (level needed varies per industry, generally eighth grade level is an appropriate starting place for entry-level employment)

**TIME MANAGEMENT:** Estimate materials and time needed to complete job; Organize, prioritize and initiate activities

**WORK MINDSET:** Attitude; Ethics; Initiative & motivation; Goal setting

a training program. If this client is showing a lack of organization or other skill than was taught prior the college staff can reinforce that module or refer the client to re-take it. In addition, the consistency of all clients taking the same modules allows the partners to reinforce prior learning. The module on Interpersonal Skills will reinforce the skills learned in the Communication module. We believe this model and consistency of curriculum will allow all clients to leave the WorkFirst program with the same skill set thereby increasing chances for employment and retention.

On behalf of the South Snohomish County Local Planning Area partners I want to thank Community, Trade and Economic Development for funding

our proposal and sharing our vision. I also want to thank our employer partners for their wise input and thoughts on “soft skills” needed for entry level employment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Amy Persell".


Amy Persell  
Workforce Education Program Manager  
Cascadia Community College  
*June 23, 2004*



# “Soft” Skills: Identifying Between-Industry Commonalities







A compilation and report on Washington State industry skills standards for basic/soft skills common among entry level positions in the following industries: Hospitality, Construction, Medical and Manufacturing. Includes business perspective and recommendations for training.

## **Introduction**

In order to prepare a comprehensive soft skill curriculum for WorkFirst participants in the South Snohomish County area, an examination of existing skills standards and theories on their development was performed to identify commonalities among four distinct industry groups: Hospitality, Construction, Medical, and Manufacturing. The focus of this research is on common soft skills needed to obtain and retain entry-level positions in each of the four industries.

## **Theory Driven Skills Standards**

In 1990, The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (henceforth SCANS) conducted a comprehensive review of previous approaches to identifying necessary job skills. Not surprisingly, the SCANS research notes the lack of agreement among researchers and personnel psychologists on three counts. First, there is lack of agreement on what level of specificity should be used to define and describe a skill. Second, there is lack of agreement regarding "the extent to which different skills are needed for different jobs. One view

holds that a single measure of general cognitive skill accounts for nearly all of the variation in performance for virtually all jobs...the other view is based on the assumption that quite different skills are required in different jobs.” The third area of disagreement stems from how broadly or narrowly one conceives job performance. A skill list developed from a narrow perspective will focus on specific proficiencies. A skill list developed from a broader perspective would also include specific proficiencies, but would add skills related to personal motivations and habits affecting the ability to carry out the listed proficiencies (Wise, Chia, & Rudner, 1990). For our purposes, a broad conception of job performance must be assumed to encompass the soft skills identified as commonalities among industries.

The SCANS research summarizes three general approaches to developing and describing job skill standards as written in the Army Synthetic Validation Project. These three approaches are respectively termed task-characteristic approaches, job-activity approaches, and ability-requirement approaches.

The task-characteristic approach is of no immediate assistance to this research, as this approach embraces the view that a single cognitive measure accounts for all performance variations for all jobs. As soft skill instruction is our focus, a task characteristic approach would not lead us to any identifiable soft-skill teaching/learning opportunities.

The job-activity approach more closely approximates our needs by focusing on activities the worker need engage in to be successful. An example of the job-activity approach is the Position Analysis Questionnaire (McCormick, Jeanneret, & Mecham, 1972), which differentiates among six general divisions: 1) Information input, 2) Mental processes, 3) Work output, 4) Relationships with other persons, 5) Job context, and 6) Other job characteristics. The job-activity approach is helpful to our soft skills standards creation, as subgroups under the six general divisions lend themselves to improvement through instruction and practice (i.e. decision making, communication, and supervisory, coordination and related activities). Other job-activity approach questionnaires also focus on motivational components such as being alert to changing situations, working in demanding job situations and interpersonal responsibility.

Ability-requirement approaches assume that there are individual differences in abilities, that these abilities are enduring qualities, and that these enduring, individual abilities are related to job performance. Although some of the



non-cognitive attributes described in the ability-requirement taxonomy include a motivational component (i.e. social interaction, stress tolerance, conscientiousness, and work orientation) the focus of the ability-requirement approach is on what are assumed to be enduring and potentially unchangeable characteristics.

As described above, the industrial psychology perspectives on job requirements are numerous and contradictory. Perhaps because of these findings, SCANS sought and obtained information from the business community on skills needed to succeed in the workplace.

### **Industry Driven Skills Standards**

In the 1985 report “Investing in our Children”, the Committee for Economic Development (CED) included a section delineating ten aptitude/behavior/skill clusters that encompass sixty skill attributes as determined by major employers. The ten clusters are as follows: 1) Striving to do work well; 2) Priority setting and working under pressure; 3) Problem solving and decision making; 4) Working well with others; 5) Communicating; 6) Learning how to learn; 7) Physical and safety demands; 8) Number skills; 9) Office skills; 10) Mechanical and laboratory skills. Skills in the areas of striving to do work well, learning how to learn, priority setting, and communication were identified by business as most important to entry-level success.

A separate list of work place skills based on a survey of businesses is included in the SCANS report. The general categories identified are: 1) Learning to learn; 2) Basic skills (reading, writing, computation); 3) Communication (listening and oral communication); 4) Creative thinking and problem solving; 5) Employability (self-esteem, motivation); 6) Interpersonal (negotiation, teamwork); and 7) Leadership and organizational effectiveness.

### **Existing Skills Standards**

The existing skills standards are compiled from two major sources: The Washington State Department of Personnel, and The Occupational Information Network (O\*NET) and O\*NET OnLine, developed for the US Department of Labor by the National O\*NET Consortium. The four targeted industries will be discussed first in succession, followed by an assessment of commonalities.

For clarity and useability, several entry-level jobs for each targeted industry will be compiled under each industry heading. For example, under the title of hospitality, data will be compiled and presented as a unit from the following

entry-level positions: retail clerk, laundry worker, food service worker, dishwasher, custodian, and fast food workers.

### ***Hospitality***

- Active Listening
- Follow written and oral instructions
- Instruct others
- Mathematics
- Meet and deal tactfully with customers
- Reading and writing skills
- Service Orientation
- Speak clearly and informatively

### ***Construction***

- Equipment selection (critical thinking)
- Estimate materials and time needed to complete jobs
- Plan and supervise work of others
- Reading and writing skills
- Understand and follow instructions

### ***Medical***

- Communication
- Coordination (with others' activities)
- Decision-making
- Establish and maintain effective relationships
- Exercise tact and diplomacy
- Follow written and oral instructions
- Organize, prioritize and initiate work activities
- Problem solving
- Review and interpret rules and regulations
- Service orientation
- Social perceptiveness
- Time management
- Work effectively with members of the public and co-workers

### ***Manufacturing***

- Equipment selection
- Follow written and oral instructions
- Get along with others
- Work independently

It is possible to group the existing skills standards by common theme to develop a matrix of between industry commonalities.

<b>Skills Standards</b>	<b>Hospitality</b>	<b>Construction</b>	<b>Medical</b>	<b>Manufacturing</b>
<b>Communication</b>	X	X	X	X
<b>Critical Thinking</b>		X	X	X
<b>Independence</b>		X	X	X
<b>Interpersonal Skills</b>	X	X	X	X
<b>Mathematics</b>	X			
<b>Time Management</b>		X	X	X

Please note the following underlying skills assumed under each standard in the matrix:

### **Communication**

- Active Listening
- Follow written and oral instructions
- Instruct others
- Reading and Writing skills
- Review and Interpret rules and regulations
- Speak clearly and informatively
- Understand and follow instruction

### **Critical Thinking**

- Decision-making
- Equipment selection
- Estimate materials and time needed to complete job
- Organize, prioritize and initiate activities
- Problem solving
- Review and interpret rules and regulations

## **Independence**

- Equipment selection
- Organize, prioritize and initiate activities

## **Interpersonal Skills**

- Coordination (of work with others)
- Establish and maintain effective relationships
- Exercise tact and diplomacy
- Get along with others
- Meet and deal tactfully with customers
- Service orientation
- Social perceptiveness
- Work effectively with members of the public and co-workers

## **Mathematics**

- Identify place value and use whole number operations in addition, subtraction, and multiplication
- Whole number division, fractions, decimals, percentages, estimates and reading graphs
- Estimations as well as exact numbers to complete computation of problems
- Use of calculators

## **Time Management**

- Estimate materials and time needed to complete job
- Organize, prioritize and initiate activities

It is interesting to note the correlation of several soft skills identified by the Washington State Department of Personnel, The Occupational Information Network and business needs. Previous research based on business needs have stated the need for six main soft skills employers have difficulty finding in prospective employees (2003 Employer Needs and Practices Survey Results – compiled by the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board). The six needs ranked in order of highest percentage of employer difficulty in recruitment are:

- Problem solving or critical thinking skills (87%)
- Communication skills (83%)
- Positive work habits and attitudes (83%)

- Ability to accept changes in job duties and responsibilities (82%)
- Teamwork skills (75%)
- Ability to accept supervision (69%)

### ***Local Focus Group Input***

Two focus groups were held in May 2004 to examine the local business perspective on the top soft skills needed by entry-level employees. Representatives from the four industries of focus were invited to participate and offer their unique perspectives. Narrative summaries of the discussions follow.

Generally, the business partners participating in the focus groups agreed with the research findings on soft skills needed. However, they also felt that other soft skills, and more basic soft skills should be added to the list. One category that arose repeatedly was something called work mind-set. This category encompassed a number of skills and attitudes including:

- the importance of attendance and punctuality,
- the need to contact the employer immediately if the employee will be late or absent and why this is important,
- appropriate attire,
- an understanding of work roles and responsibilities (not just the employees own, but also their supervisors and other members of the team),
- an understanding that constructive feedback is not a personal attack, but a chance to grow and improve,
- an understanding of impression creation and management,
- an ability to decipher what is an immediate need and what can wait,
- an ability to think through alternatives to select the best course of action
- an understand of the ways a positive work life can enhance the home life,
- negotiation skills.

Business partners also noted the possibility that some of the soft-skills listed were possible higher order skills, necessitating a breakdown of these skills into more fundamental components. Example, instead of a module termed “critical thinking”, breaking this concept down into “assessment of situation”, “brainstorming alternatives”, “imagining consequences”, “selecting the best alternative” and “implementation”, would give the soft-skill student a more complete understanding of the module. Granted, this is difficult to accomplish in short-term training, but any new exposure to soft skills would be of help.

The last area of concern addressed by the business partners during the focus group meetings is how to assess a student's level of soft skill in order to place them in appropriate classes at appropriate levels. Regardless of need, students asked to take part in soft-skill training have expressed denial regarding the need they have for these skills, and have expressed a feeling of offense at being selected for these programs. Any curriculum developed and presented should keep this in mind, both during the naming of the modules, and during the presentation of curriculum.

In summary, business and government research support the need for four main soft skills: Communication, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills, and work-mind set. The development of a training program to enhance and solidify these skills in job seekers would benefit the state through possible reduction of unemployment and a higher tax base, business through an increased availability of desired workers, and the individuals who complete the training program through the enhancement of skills needed to be an employable and productive worker in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This addendum lists a number of resources to assess and create soft-skill training curriculum.

### ***Internet sites***

*<http://newfederalism.urban.org/html/anf25.html>*

*<http://outreach.missouri.edu/tough-life-skills/>*

*\*<http://www.hud.gov/offices/hsg/mfh/nnw/resourcesforcenters/nnwpublicationsguides.cfm>*

*\*One link presents developed soft-skill curriculum, complete with instructor manual and student worksheets. Highly recommended.*

### ***Book***

Buckingham, M., and Clifton, D.O. (2001). *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. The Free Press, a division of Simon and Schuster Inc. New York, NY.

Robyn M. Buck  
Researcher  
RB Enterprises  
May 21, 2004

# Focus Groups Summary Report









## **“Soft” Skills: Identifying Between-Industry Commonalities**

### ***Focus Question***

“What are the skill standards on soft skills for entry level employment in medical, manufacturing, construction and hospitality in South Snohomish County?”

*May 17 and May 19, 2004*

### ***Agenda***

1. Welcome and introductions
2. Context – overview and purpose
3. Review of core soft skills needed by each industry
4. Review matrix distribution
5. Review most recent 2003 employer survey of soft skills in most demand.
6. Summary of findings

### ***Participants***

1. Katie Holmes, Service Alternatives
2. Robin Buck (Researcher)
3. Amy Persell, Cascadia Community College
4. Michelle Perine, Cloud Nine Sheepskin

5. Angela Schroeder, Randstad Work Solutions
6. Reggie Taschereau, Lowe's of Lynnwood
7. Sue Ambler, Snohomish County WDC

## **Summary Notes**

The employers corroborated the research findings on basic skills but went beyond the descriptions of the skills and emphasized two knowledge sets that must accompany the soft skills. These knowledge sets include:

### **A work-based mindset**

Common sense about work and the working life seems to be lacking in many more people than one might imagine. Many don't understand where they are and what their role at work is. They seem oblivious to the expectations of an employer (not to mention their own best professional interests.) They are so used to living from one very pressing crisis to the next that the idea of having control of their lives is very foreign. Their awareness of the working environment and how to interact with it in an effective and creative way is lacking and absenteeism and tardiness are common amongst such employees. Many need guidance on how to start a job successfully. Most new hires seem unaware of what to expect in a new job regards knowing what is normal and expected. For example, there is a learning curve for new hires and during that time mistakes occur. What is important is not so much avoiding errors because they will occur for new hires especially during the learning curve on a new job, but on knowing how to respond effectively. Mistakes and errors are opportunities to learn and new hires should know this. So overall, as soft skills are taught, students should also be brought to an awareness of the culture of a working life as different from life on welfare. Many are not engaged with their lives so it's hard for them to get engaged with life! Motivation and pride in work tend to be absent and their cultivation should be part of the new curriculum.

### **Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and Comprehension**

This combination of foundation knowledge and skill was emphasized over and over again as being bed rock to all soft skill development. Numerous examples were given to illustrate how crucial this knowledge and skill-base is. For example, all four knowledge sets were necessary to develop skills in:

- Negotiation
- Problem solving
- Getting along with others

- Thinking critically or just thinking
- Following instructions
- Reviewing and interpreting rules
- And to understand their pay deductions for retirement, healthcare and tax contributions etc

The group examined the research and highlighted the following two soft skills-sets as being especially important:

**Getting along with others** (Builds off skills in communications, interpersonal skills and critical thinking)

Refined interpersonal skills include learning to eliminate the drama in interactions with others. A dramatic style of communication can be distracting and is often unhelpful since it tends to impede problem solving and the resolution of issues.

It is not an expected or sought-after style in a new employee. Being able to employ tact and diplomacy in interactions with customers is important in all the major industries but even more so in healthcare.

But less complicated than this however, most do not have the skills to negotiate with their employers over medical appointments, child-care needs and so on. This often leads to poor decisions especially when they fail to give their employer warnings of pending absences. Whether it is from fear of making a mistake or being found out as not knowing something – the failure to ask for help can be costly to a company. So the skill set that enables a person to work out decisions with their employer rather than act impulsively or in isolation is very critical to longevity in the workplace.

Regards understanding others, new hires need to learn to draw the right conclusions from their interactions with others and to discriminate between home and family relationships and their professional relationships. For example, learning to agree to disagree while not common at home, perhaps, is very critical at work if one is to get along with co-workers. One is expected, for example, to support the company line – even if one disagrees with it.

The soft skill that results in a person gaining insight about their own style, strengths and biases also provides them with insights into others' style, strengths and biases. This can go along way in enabling a person to work well with others.

Independence and the ability work independently comes in time and builds on hard experience and growing expertise and confidence.

### **Time Management and Critical Thinking**

The group added personal management to this category of soft skills. A key element of personal management that the group gave emphasis to was the whole area of work and life planning. For example, many just need to learn how to cope and to know that there is a future that can be different for them. They also need to know how to blend life and work and think more long-term and less short-term. The panel described the difficulty that many have planning ahead and making back-up plans for child care emergencies, illness or car break downs. This deficit also affects work in that they have difficulty foreseeing the implications of their actions on the job as they may affect co-workers and/or customers.

Not unrelated to skills in critical thinking and time management is low self esteem, common amongst many and an impediment to the development of skills in this area. The inability to grasp that which is urgent in the work place like a customer's order, for example, is serious. So being able think critically, evaluate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak, and to manage one's time and circumstances effectively is very, very important.

In discussing the six skills which employers are most in need of and have the greatest difficulty finding, the panel felt that the results were skewed by the bias of employers to want super stars who are multi-flexible, multi-skilled and masters of communications. For example, the predominance of problem solving skills suggested to the panel more of a management breakdown in communication than major deficits amongst employees.

Based on this discussion and the emphasis given by the employers it appears that the three primary soft skills of communication, critical thinking and interpersonal skills should indeed form the core of any new soft skills curriculum for the TANF population.

The discussion was concluded after one hour.

Dave Cunningham  
Facilitator, Focus Group Leader  
dcun@comcast.net  
*May 23, 2004*

# Curriculum Outline







## **Module One: Work Mindset**

### ***Learning Objectives***

The student will:

1. Understand what work ethics are
2. Understand the role of initiative and motivation in the workplace
3. Learn the key components of work ethics and understand their own strengths and weaknesses in work attitude and ethic
4. Learn how to set goals and the benefits of goal setting

## **Module Two: Communication**

### ***Learning Objectives***

The student will:

1. Understand both personal and systemic communication processes
2. Learn the barriers to effective communication
3. Understand his/her role as a listener
4. Learn techniques for improving communication skills

## **Module Three: Interpersonal Skills**

### ***Learning Objectives***

The student will:

1. Discuss and consider the importance of interpersonal skills in the workplace
2. Learn workplace problem solving skills
3. Learn the importance of working as a team
4. Understand how perception impacts self and systems
5. Learn interpersonal techniques and behaviors

## **Module Four: Time Management**

### ***Learning Objectives***

The student will:

1. Understand the value of prioritizing
2. Recognize how effective time and project management impacts self and systems
3. Learn time management techniques and tricks
4. Understand the role of initiative and motivation in prioritizing tasks

**Note:** The grant funds have only allowed us to develop the curriculum for four modules. The remaining modules, critical thinking and independence along with math, reading and writing, will be developed at a later date once additional funds are identified.



# Gratitude & Appreciation







Thank you to our employer partners for supporting this project by providing valued input.

***Employer Partners***

Dick Jansen	Chermak Construction
Reggie Taschereau	Lowe's
Kay Weiss	Sun Health Care Group
John Bower	Employee Benefit Solutions
Karen Holland	Planned Parenthood
Angela Schroeder	Randstad Work Solutions
Michele Perine	Cloud Nine Sheepskin
Katie Holmes	Service Alternatives
Sue Ambler	Snohomish County Workforce Development Council
Heather Saddler	B&H Dental Lab

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